

Team PA – Take a Hike
By Rear Admiral John Kirby, U.S. Navy Chief of Information

My grandfather believed you could tell a lot about a man by looking at his shoes. Take a look at what a guy wears on his feet, Pop used to say, and you know where he's been—and probably where he's going.

Pop was a blue collar man, a steam engineer and a semi-pro boxer during the Depression. He liked things simple. Maybe too simple. But I think the old man had a point.

In fact, I think much the same can be said about public affairs professionals. You can tell a lot about us by our shoes—not the shine, though that certainly counts for something. No, I'm talking about the soles.

A good PAO will have worn out soles...because a good PAO will do a lot of walking.

You can't provide context if you aren't having meaningful conversations. And you can't have meaningful conversations from your desk. It's impossible. Can't do it on Twitter or Facebook. Can't put it in an email. I don't even think you can do it over the phone, not really.

You've got to walk the halls and p-ways. You've got to sit down with people, one-on-one in THEIR spaces, and listen and talk...and then listen some more. You've got to maintain good relationships, whether those relationships are with the rest of the staff or with the media. That's how things get done in our business. Walking and talking is how we learn.

It's how we build trust.

The old maxim about war was that truth was the first casualty. Not anymore. Today, it is trust. And trust between the military and the media can only be established carefully, with effort and over time. You can't do it once a crisis hits. Too late.

Several years ago, I reported to a job in a new town. I didn't know anyone there, not a soul. Certainly didn't know the local media.

The job was a big one, too, lots of responsibilities—a major staff. Boss was a three-star. Heavy operational focus. I was nervous.

A good friend of mine had done a tour in the same duty station some years earlier.

“Tell you what,” he said. “Go print yourself up some business cards and visit each and every local reporter. Talk to 'em. Listen to 'em. Don't leave until you know who their bosses are, what deadlines they face, how many kids they have, and the names of every dog they've ever owned.”

“Get to know them well,” he said, “BEFORE you need to know them well.”

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My friend reminded me that relationships matter—perhaps more than anything else—and that reporters are people, same as you and I. And just like you and I, they have jobs to do, kids to feed, bills to pay and, yes, dogs to walk.

Now, I knew helping reporters do their jobs was a big part of doing mine. But I didn't fully appreciate that I couldn't do my job without a deeper understanding of the pressures reporters face—their concerns, goals, personalities and passions. Just as World War I pilots memorized the silhouettes of fighters, friend and foe, so, too, did I need to know reporters as individuals.

As Thom Shanker, veteran Pentagon correspondent for the New York Times said, "There is no Capital 'M' media any more than there is a homogeneous military. Learn the distinctions."

And so I visited. And we talked. And I listened. And what I learned fascinated me.

Turns out one of them fought in Desert Storm. One had six kids and volunteered for local charities. Another had family ties to naval aviation. Still another had written a book about the Navy. Each of these reporters was invested in the community, and, quite frankly, in the military's role in that community. They took seriously their craft and their sense of civic duty.

I can't say I welcomed or enjoyed every story they produced. But I can say the dialogue never waned. The relationships stayed strong. Indeed, some of those relationships, all these years later, remain strong. And that's because we—the reporters and I—worked hard at it, personally and directly.

We stayed in touch. We spent time with one another. We ate meals together. We paid attention to each other.

If an issue required a face-to-face meeting, we scheduled it. If a story needed an extra bit of nuance, we explored it. If the best and most economical way to deal with a query was through email, OK, I sent an email. But I tried hard never to let that be the preferred method of conversation. I tried hard to make it human.

After all, relationships—whether personal or professional—are at their root human endeavors.

I like the way Rick Barnard, former executive editor of Defense News, put it: "The best press relations are simply good human relations. Get to know the reporters who cover your industry...give them a chance to know you. You don't have to be pals or golfing buddies. But there should be a give-and-take relationship based on the mutual understanding that your jobs and your objectives often converge."

Look, I'm a dinosaur. I know that. But I worry that technology makes it too easy for us to stay aloof and distant—to communicate rather than to explain, to reply rather than relate.

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Thanks to social media, we have plenty of connections today but potentially fewer relationships. And that's a shame.

Actually, it's more than a shame. It's detrimental to our duty as public affairs professionals. And it runs counter to the expectations of our leaders, who want us plugged in.

That's why I've asked the Fleet PA shops to consider establishing internships with local media outlets. We're going to do the same here in Washington. The idea is that we detail MCs, junior PAOs and civilian PA Specialists—on no-cost orders—to work temporarily at newspapers or radio and television stations. They'll gain valuable skills. The local media, hopefully, will gain more insight about military matters. And both sides will get to know each other better.

I'm excited to see how it works. But in the meantime, if you aren't getting up and out of your offices... and walking around...and having conversations...and building relationships, please start doing so. Now.

Take a good, hard look at those soles. And ask yourself: can I wear them out a little more?

(From a message sent by Rear Admiral Kirby to the U.S. Navy Public Affairs community on August 29, 2013.)